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ABSTRACT

According to James Britton, too much emphasis is being placed currently on revision. In his essay, "Shaping at the Point of Utterance," Britton notes that (1) concentrating on the reader in teaching writing can disturb the writer's ability to formulate what he or she wants to say; (2) the essence of the writing process is not writing something to be cleaned up later, but rather creating connections between ideas; (3) a precise and explicit mastery of the rules of writing can obstruct effective writing; and (4) writing develops in a complex relationship to speech and not by a process of differentiating between spoken and written discourse. This information conflicts directly with some of the basic principles that underly many composition texts and teaching models. Britton also states that the basic force of writing comes less from the effort to persuade a reader and more from the effort to articulate the writer's experience. This suggests the great value in writing instruction of using very frequent short writings, emphasizing validation through the writer's experiential knowledge, and staying aware of the close relationships between writing and speaking and between writing and learning. (HOD)

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Shaping AT the Point of Utterance rather than Afterwards

For the past several years, the big thing in teaching writing seems to have been revision. That makes a good deal of sense because students in general seem to have a lot of difficulty manipulating something they have written into something that articulates what they want to say in as controlled a way as they would like. For a great many, the only changes they seem to be able to imagine are corrective changes, changes in spelling, punctuation, agreement or other aspects of writing mechanics. They have great difficulty developing an undeveloped assertion, changing their thesis when the paper goes in a different direction, and in general, establishing firmer control over what their writing is doing and how it is doing it. We know that beginning writers can't do all this at once, so we sensibly model a lot of it into revising procedures. We have revision models that do everything from grammar to problem-solving. When I heard James Britton warning that we might be placing too much emphasis on revision, I remember being almost angry. But, his status as a major authority in writing project circles and as a god-father of developmental approaches to teaching writing made him someone to

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attend to. His work, grounded as it is in such unfamiliar idioms as the linguistics of Firth, the philosophy of Cassirer and Langer, and the psychology of Vygotsky is a very subtle and sophisticated analysis of the nature of writing and how it is learned. Clearly, there was a significant dilemma articulated in the conflict between acknowledged authorities and approaches in the field of composition.

Now that I have been reading Britton quite carefully for several years, I have come to suspect that his theories have been assimilated much too easily into our conventional models for teaching writing. He was involved in the 1968 Dartmouth Conference, and his notion of expressive writing sounds deceptively like our notions of free-writing and pre-writing. But we are missing some important differences, and his recent work can be read in part as a gentle attempt to let us know that. This seems quite clear to when one looks carefully his brief essay, "Shaping at the Point of Utterance.

The radical force of this essay can best be seen if I list off the basic information and conclusions of the piece.

1) That concentrating on the reader in teaching writing can disturb the writer's ability to use writing to formulate what he wants to say.

2) That what is essential in the writing process is not writing something to be cleaned up later in a better version, but rather writing to lead one to what one will say next.

3) That at a certain point, a precise and explicit mastery of the rules of writing can become an obstruction to effective writing.

4) That writing develops in a complex relation to speech and not by a process of differentiating between spoken and written discourse.

This information conflicts rather directly with some basic principles that underly most of our texts and teaching models:

1) The importance of taking account of the audience in writing,

2) The importance attached to teaching revision processes,

3) The importance of gaining mastery of the rules of

good writing,

4) The importance of discriminating between linguistic idioms of speech and writing.

Britton's essay has another more fundamental point that is difficult to state because of the terminology it seems to require and the ideological conflict it thus generates. In terms reminiscent of Dewey, Britton argues that what authenticates the act of writing is less its being ordered perceptually with regard to the processing powers of the audience--the basic focus of the E.D. Hirsch Jr. school of composition--and more its being ordered experientially with reference to the understanding of the writer. In this way of thinking, rhetorical effectiveness seems to be a kind of secondary effect that derives from the fact that, in coming to terms with an idea in writing, the writer makes that idea available to any reader as a result of its being made thus available to the writer through writing, that articulation makes an idea sharable more than sharing makes it articulable. Put another way, Britton's point is that the basic force of writing comes less from the writer's effort to persuade a reader, and more from the effort to articulate the experience of the knowing that the writing articulates. Even more importantly, he feels that in the writing process, the sharing and articulating emphases can

obstruct each other.

This is all unfortunately theoretical, but I have hammered the point here to make the point of how radically "unamerican" Britton's perspective is. It may be that what we are seeing here is a result of basic cultural differences, the greater homogeneity of culture and education in England as against the greater heterogeneity in the United States, and so forth, but on the other hand, I doubt that Britton's work will be that useful to us until we see clearly how alien he is.

Let me dramatize the difference in terms of the four short pieces of writing here. They are short summaries of an essay by Wendell Berry called, "In Defense of Literacy."

1. "The essay explains the importance of literacy. Literacy is the media through which we begin to understand new material and the things around us to a fuller extent. A quote by Wendell Berry inforces this idea, "In our society, which exists in an atmosphere of prepared, public language--language that is either written or being read--illiteracy is both a personal and a public danger." He also states that literacy is a necessity not an ornament. In other words it has a definite purpose and is essential to understanding the world around us."

2. "The published illiteracies of the certified educated are on

an increase. This is supported by the different examples given. These are the schools and the use of "practicality," the control we have of our language, the ignorance of books and lack of critical consciousness as well as the media and the effect it has on our language."

3. "Our language is a necessity for a person to be productive in society, but our language has been changing and not considered a necessity. Our language must be reseaded into the children of the future so they know the real language and how it works."

4. "The main point of the essay is that our society is taking literacy for granted. Berry says that we do not expect anyone to master our language unless they're a teacher. We just sit back and absorb premeditated language. We just listen to something once and then throw it away which shows a lack of creativity and value."

With specimens this brief, we might well feel rather at sea in trying to understand what is going on. The absence of expressed context makes problems in understanding. But at the same time, a great deal of the writing that one does in college and that one will do in the world is of this sort, and we constantly are making judgments about its relative proficiency, if

only by not paying attention.

When we try to make distinctions between the paragraphs in terms of their relative proficiency, some interesting things happen. Few would disagree, I think, that #3 has problems. It goes for only two sentences, and the second sentence has to start on a new subject. We can classify the incoherence there under our conventional handbook notions of cohesion and unity.

But then, how does one distinguish between the relative proficiency of #s 1, 2 and 4? #2 has something like a thesis in the first sentence and then says it is offering support in the remaining sentences. #1 is the fullest, and seems to have a thesis focus. But what of #4? It has a thesis in the first sentence, but then it goes on to do something else that is more like restating than developing with examples. And yet, for some reason, it seems more coherent than any of the others.

I don't think such formal descriptive terms are going to help us very much. What Britton suggests we ask, though, is whether or not the writer is habitually explaining by showing how he experienced the knowledge he is communicating. From this perspective, #3 is still pretty much out of the game. One has the sense that it is trying to have the "right" phrases as in a multiple-choice test. But when we look at #2, the apparent difference between it and #3 diminishes. The fact that the writer confuses Berry's thesis and her own--we don't know whether that is a quote or a position, whether she is being Berry or being herself--puts a barrier between us and the experience of knowing.

When we see a student using a sentence to assert merely that there are examples but without getting to them, we can suspect that the class or course-generated expectations concerning mastery of the rules of writing are obstructing the student's writing.

#1 clearly does better. The first sentence is a statement about the Berry essay, so we can see what the writer wants to do. But the third sentence has partially fallen into the trap of #2. The necessity of knowing about proof forces her to lose her self, and the fuzziness of form and the repetion are results of that skewed emphasis.

#4 is the one that, in Britton's phrase, "gets into the tramlines." The second statement is a statement of how the writer knows the first sentence. The third does the same with relation to the second, and so forth. Here you can see "shaping at the point of utterance" as the writer moves from sentence to sentence, translating the idea into experienced knowledge. In our formalistic mindset, we might even miss the proficiency here because the retranslations seem to avoid the "vivid, concrete examples" that we need to persuade our readers.

Britton's work is thus interesting for the resources he provides for understanding what goes on in a piece of writing from the first sentence, the way writing generates form and expectation from the first application of written words to meaning. He also uses several research studies to sharpen our larger sense of what he is about. I was particularly interested in the unpublished study by Mike Rose demonstrating how too precise an understanding

of writing rules gets in the writer's way, and in the study of the serious effect on writing that comes when the writer is prevented from seeing very much of what he has just written. Given the amount of time and effort we put into having students learn what handbooks and rhetorics say about how to write and into having students write in the expectation of revising, such conclusions can have the impact of a finely tuned horror movie.

What one concludes from this is not that one should give up all work on mechanics, on the learning and applying of rhetorical rules, on revision and on writing in extended forms. What it does suggest, though, is the value and importance in the teaching of writing of using very frequent short writings, emphasizing validation through the writer's experiential knowledge, and staying aware of the close relation between writing and speaking, and between writing and learning.